

(U) Thorny Supervisory Problem? Ask Zelda! -- Today's Dilemma: 'The Odoriferous Officemate'

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice for SID Supervisors

Run Date: 08/06/2010

(U) Editor's note: The entire text below is UNCLASSIFIED.



Dear Zelda,

How do I deal with an employee whose personal hygiene needs improvement, without embarrassing both of us?

Signed, Gasping for Air

Dear Gasping,

Hoo-boy, you readers sure ask some tough questions! As you are well aware, sometimes it really stinks to be a supervisor, and this is one of them (sorry, I couldn't resist).

While it might be tempting to ignore an awkward situation like the one you've described, you should take action before someone less diplomatic says something that hurts the employee's feelings and embarrasses her. But don't sweat it -- all it takes is a little tact and compassion.

I'm sure you've already thought of all the easy ways out:

- an anonymous note
- leaving a can of deodorant on her desk
- bringing in a large container of potpourri and placing it outside her cubicle
- relocating her to a private office
- "accidentally" spritzing her with cologne or air freshener
- beginning an office discussion about everyone's favorite brand of soap and its effectiveness
- making a joke of it ("Gee, you must have parked at the Colony Seven today because you smell like you've just walked a mile in the hot sun.")

While these may work, I am going to recommend the direct approach. Have an informal chat with the person and keep it low-key. Here are some guidelines:

- Find a private location for the discussion.
- Don't beat around the bush or try to drop hints. Be honest and kind. State your observation simply, and be as specific as possible. For example, "I've noticed the smell of [fill in the blank] and am concerned that it might interfere with your interactions with customers/co-workers."
- Adopt a neutral, non-judging attitude. The issue could be caused by a number of things, and you shouldn't speculate or assume. You are there to be helpful and bring something important to her attention. You could even say something like, "If it were me, I'd want to know."

- Be sympathetic to her response and be prepared to give advice, if asked. Example: the employee tells you she has an hour commute in a car with no air conditioning and doesn't know what she can do about smelling sweaty. You could remind her that there are locker rooms in many NSA buildings where people can take showers, and suggest that she bring a change of clothing to work. But also realize that the employee is under no obligation to tell you the cause, only to correct the problem. It may be very personal (a medical condition, being evicted and living in her car), and while you should appear open and willing to help ("Is there anything I can do?"), you shouldn't pry.
- If the person gets defensive, remain calm and understanding. Focus on the impact to the work.
- Follow up to make sure corrective action has been taken. Allow time for the change and give feedback -- whether positive or negative.

You might also want to speak to the person's good qualities. Tell her she is a valued employee and you hate to see this getting in the way of her effectiveness at work.

I won't promise that it will be easy, but with the right approach neither of you should be too embarrassed. So do everyone a favor and clear the air where your malodorous subordinate is concerned. Your whole office will breathe a lot easier for it.

Feldt
